

# Fightback

*Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism*



## HOUSING

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# Editorial

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Access to adequate housing is a basic human right. The UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights lists housing as one of the basic necessities for an adequate standard of living. However, in Aotearoa New Zealand and other “advanced” countries, the crisis of affordable housing is worsening. The promise of home ownership that previous generations of working people took for granted is now out of reach for most, as house prices continue to rise. At the same time, rents are increasing and the waiting list for public housing is in the thousands. As well as Ani White’s examination of the Labour government’s underwhelming housing policies, we have reprinted articles from the USA and Australia which show that, despite differences in the regulation and provision of public and private housing, the crisis is much the same.

This issue of *Fightback* looks at the reasons behind the housing crisis and responses to it from governments and housing activists. But we also look at the related and contentious issue of urbanism - what sort of cities do we want to live in? While the pressure of climate change is now acknowledged by governments and urban authorities, attempts to make cities less car-dependent are resisted.

Media portray the debate as one between privileged inner-city dwellers and suburban workers who rely on cars to get around. John Polkinghorne from Greater Auckland looks at how cities like Auckland can be more inclusive and less car-dependent without further disadvantaging poorer communities.

Finally, the *Fightback* editorial board apologises to our subscribers for the lateness of this issue. As a small group of people who are all working or studying full-time, we all struggle to fit our work on *Fightback* in between our work or personal commitments. We welcome anyone who supports what we are doing to contribute in any way. Not all of the interruptions to the production of this issue have been unwelcome though - on behalf of the editorial board, congratulations to Daphne Lawless and her family on the arrival of their new baby on June 21.





Cross-section of a socially-equitable housing unit in Sandringham, Auckland. From <https://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/first-thab-off-the-rank/>

# Everyone should care about urbanism, and here's why

By JOHN POLKINGHORNE

New Zealand cities have so many good things going for them, but they're let down by inadequate housing and transport. Mouldy old homes rent for exorbitant sums. Traffic-clogged roads are unpleasant (or even unsafe) for anyone not in a car.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can rethink where we live and how we get around, and transition to a society that is more affordable, more equitable, healthier, and with much lower greenhouse gas emissions. This will be better for all urban residents, especially low-income and vulnerable people.

## What Do Urbanist Cities Look Like?

Urbanist cities should be inclusive and offer a range of housing and transport choices. Affordability is key to becoming inclusive: everyone should be able to afford a lifestyle that satisfies their basic needs (see 'the human right to housing') and allows them to participate in society.

That doesn't mean everyone gets everything they want: cities are limited for space and there are tradeoffs involved. New Zealanders expect to be able to drive wherever and whenever they want, and that has to change.

## Why Aren't We There Already?

Since the 1950s, New Zealand governments and councils have spent the vast majority of their transport budgets on roads, with almost nothing for public or active (walking and cycling) transport. That has resulted in the car-dominated society we have today.

Working-class neighbourhoods were starved of public transport – not because the wealthy neighbourhoods have gotten all the investment, but because too much money went on motorways and non-driving modes only got crumbs.



Working-class communities suffer when there aren't good alternatives to driving. Low-income households are more likely to be carless, and this can cut them off from accessing jobs, educational opportunities and the other places they need to get to. With better alternatives to driving, low-income households can manage without a car more easily, or manage with *one less* car and save money without making their lives any harder.

Since the 1970s, new homes in New Zealand have been built on the edges of our cities, with little regard for how the residents will get around if they don't have a car. The rate of housing construction has also slowed since the 1970s, and it fluctuates with economic ups and downs. Auckland was especially hit by the post-GFC downturn, even as the city's population kept growing – and that was when the housing shortage really started to escalate into a crisis.

Auckland's housing crisis shows up in all sorts of data. Most of the Western world has an ageing population and the average number of 'people per household' is falling as a result – but Auckland stayed flat at 3.0 people per household over 2001-2013 and has now risen to almost 3.2. The statistic might sound bland, but it has real-life consequences, with people struggling to find homes that are right for them. It hits low-income areas hardest and results in overcrowding and substandard living conditions.

Rents in some cities have skyrocketed since 2015, as faster population growth hit a wall of inflexible housing supply. Even in Auckland, rents have steadily crept upwards year after year (now over \$560 a week), whereas a stronger supply response would see them flatten out or even decline. Landlords haven't had to compete for tenants, so they haven't bothered to upgrade their properties – 38% of rented homes in New Zealand are damp, and 20% are mouldy.

Decades of bad decisions have brought us to our current situation. Neither housing nor transport are good enough, and it's not good enough to say that they'll take decades more to fix. We need rapid action on all fronts.

## Creating Better Choices

At a government level, both left and right-wing parties agree that "we need more housing supply", but they can't quite agree on what that means. At the council level, things are even more disjointed as many councillors feel the need to appease NIMBY (not in my back yard) voters.

As for me, I want to see lots of new homes in places that are central, well-connected or highly desirable.

This often isn't allowed under current planning rules. This will deliver real housing choices and bring down rents everywhere, not just the places where those homes are built.

Cycleways and bus lanes can be rolled out very quickly (and cheaply!) with political and community will, and in just a few short years they could cover much larger parts of our cities. Building busways or light rail is more expensive and takes longer, but we will need that too.

Gustavo Petro, a former mayor of Bogotá, said "a developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It's where the rich use public transportation". To unpack this: driving is expensive for the poor to afford. If they have good public (and active!) transport options, that's a start. If public transport is so convenient that even the rich want to take it, that's job done.

I grew up in a central Auckland suburb, and flatbed in Mt Albert and Sandringham while studying. I never considered living in an apartment until I moved to the city centre in 2009. 12 years on, I've never wanted to leave. Large parts of the city centre have transformed around me, creating shiny new apartments and hotels but also public spaces and waterfronts a short walk away. I've never been more than a 15-minute walk away from university and (subsequently) work, and now that I have a toddler I'm a similar distance from his daycare.

I've chosen this lifestyle, which comes with pros and cons, and I've been lucky enough to have the choice. Living close to work is a luxury in Auckland, and not having to sit in (and contribute to) traffic is a luxury as well. Many Aucklanders have chosen something different to me – maybe they really enjoy suburban living, or being out in the wops even if it means a lot of driving – but many Aucklanders feel like they don't have good choices about where and how to live.

The Auckland and Wellington city centres offer a glimpse of the future (albeit with room for improvement), but there's currently no 'middle ground' between them and car-dependent suburbia. Providing middle-ground housing options in more places is a big part of the solution.

## The Outcome

What would an urbanist city in New Zealand look like – Auckland or Wellington after ten years of focused change? It would be densest in the central suburbs, and around transit lines and town centres. Land here is valuable so people would mainly live in apartments, but these would range from small to family-sized with floorspace quite affordable. The buildings themselves could be at suburban scale,





*New intensified housing in Waterview, Auckland.*

well designed and integrated with their surroundings. Further out, housing would trend more towards townhouses, terraces, and walk-up apartments. And further out again, homes would predominantly be detached houses as they are today.

Public transport would be so reliable and practical that we'd take it for granted – and we'd take it all over the city. Bus lanes and signal priority would mean buses arrive when they're supposed to, with crosstown routes connecting town centres and suburbs. "Rapid transit" lines, including rail, light rail and busways, would help to shift people in and out of the city centre and other high-demand areas.

Active transport would be equally reliable and practical, with people on bikes protected from those in cars so that 8-year-olds and 80-year-olds could cycle without fear. The world is already in the early days of an electric (e-bike) revolution – these incredible machines can cover distance quickly, and 'smooth out' hills for much easier riding. They will have a profound impact globally. In New Zealand they will be relevant in every suburb of every city, and even in smaller towns and rural areas. E-bikes might just save us all.

It's not about forcing people into chicken coops or out of their cars. There should be good choices available for everyone in the city, meaning:

- Housing everywhere becoming more affordable (i.e., lower rents), with new options that don't exist currently: high or medium-rise apartments in town centres, and walk-up apartments or terraces close by.

- Shortening your commute – because you might want to move closer to work, in one of the new homes. Most of us would like to spend less time on the road. Many areas will see improved public transport, and everywhere will be easier to bike around.
- Bringing people closer together, and giving them better alternatives to driving, brings more opportunities within reach. It's a powerful thing for economic development to increase the number of jobs that can be accessed within 45 minutes of a suburb.
- The public benefits are huge. Continuing to sprawl out into the countryside will be very expensive for Auckland, with the infrastructure costs alone almost \$150,000 per home.

All of this is completely achievable. We must choose whether to keep doing what we've always done or strive for something better. That "something better" will create better choices for the people who live in our cities, or who might someday. It will benefit people throughout those cities: high income or low, central or suburban. Even people who continue driving will be able to enjoy safer, less congested roads.

Urbanist cities are fairer, more affordable cities. That's good news for everyone. As to how we can get there? I suggest advocating to your council for a vigorous NPS-UD response on intensification (look the acronym up!) and pushing for bus lanes and cycleways, the transport 'quick wins'.



# Extract from urban housing is an ecosocialist issue

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Fightback's DAPHNE LAWLESS has been writing on housing from an ecosocialist point of view for a few years now. The full version of this article from 2015 is available at <https://fightback.org.nz/2015/02/13/urban-housing-is-an-ecosocialist-issue/>.

It's obvious that there is a great shortage of quality, affordable housing in Aotearoa. Or to be more precise, there's a shortage in those places where people want to live. Rural houses are great for people who can support themselves in a rural lifestyle, like farm workers or independent writers or artists. But the facts of life in a modern economy are that most of the economic growth, and therefore new jobs and opportunities, will happen in the cities – Auckland in particular, but Wellington, Christchurch and Hamilton as well.

## Explosive growth

Auckland's explosive growth to nearly 1.5 million inhabitants is also exacerbated, not only by its milder climate compared to our other urban centres, but by immigration. New settlers in our country prefer to live near to people who share their culture, hence Auckland's massively high levels of cultural diversity compared to the rest of the country. Whether Pasifika peoples in Mangere, Chinese in Botany or people from the Indian subcontinent in Sandringham, Auckland's cultural mosaic gets more complicated and colourful all the time. But Auckland's expanding population needs somewhere to live.

One of the main problems of neoliberal capitalism is that, when wages are pushed down, workers can't buy things and the economy slows. One of the solutions – in virtually every advanced country in the world – has been to semi-deliberately create a housing bubble. Loans for buying houses have become cheap and plentiful, pushing up prices. And when house prices go up, those who already own houses (the middle and upper classes) benefit. They can buy cars or go on holidays and “put it on the mortgage”.

But even capitalist economics understands what happens when you just pump more money into a market – prices go up overall.

The longer the bubble goes on, the less hope for the people at the bottom of the “housing ladder”. A similar thing happens in the rental market with WINZ giving out Accommodation Supplement, a rent subsidy for those on low-to-average incomes. This money just goes to boost the landlord's profits, and rents rise to match.

## Pricking the bubble

The housing bubble is therefore just another way of transferring wealth from the property-less to the property-owners. But even our bosses are getting nervous that we could end up in a situation like the United States or Ireland, where after the bubble burst, entire neighbourhoods became vacant after their mortgages were foreclosed on. Hence, the Reserve Bank has recently cut the availability of loans for new home-owners (once again punishing the needy so as to safeguard the gains of the greedy).

So what's a pro-worker, pro-environment solution to the housing crisis? A bursting housing bubble might bring prices down, but would also cause massive economic recession. The right-wing wants us to think that the answer is building new housing zones on the fringes of the urban area at “affordable prices”.

Let's go through all the ways that this kind of urban sprawl is ecological and economic bad news:

- New fringe suburbs encroach onto fertile farming land. Some of Auckland's best volcanic soils (such as the market gardens in Avondale) have long since been built over. Pushing development towards Pukekohe would put the food sustainability of the region under severe pressure.



- New developments require brand new services such as telephone, stormwater and electricity to be built, at a high cost.
- In New Zealand, new housing areas are generally built without any thought as to public transport – and generally nowhere near workplaces. Not only does this require that everyone who lives there has to own a car, but they have to commute for stupid distances across our already-clogged motorway network, turning expensive fossil fuels into air pollution as they do so.

The alternative is for Auckland to grow *up*, *not out*. That is, new affordable, high-density (flat or apartment) housing should be built in and around the Central City and central suburbs.

The old working-men's cottages of Auckland's central fringe suburbs can now fetch more than \$1 million. The last thing that their privileged current owners want is for the price to be brought down by affordable apartments being built round the corner – or indeed, for working-class (or non-white) people to live in their area at all. They'd much prefer working people out of sight and out of mind, in the far-flung fringes. Which is of course precisely what happened to the inhabitants of "old" Ponsonby – Mangere and Otara were settled by refugees from "slum clearances" and motorway madness around the CBD. Making urban life in Auckland more accessible, affordable and vibrant is the last thing that the ultra-exclusive, financially-segregated communities of the city fringe want.

## Anti-urbanism

Studying the facts, it becomes clear that to improve quality of life in Auckland, to reduce social inequalities and make life richer and more affordable for working people, the affordable as well as the green solution is centralisation and intensification combined with much better public transport. However, many who see themselves on the liberal side or even the Left of politics wouldn't agree.

When I interviewed veteran activist John Minto a few years ago, when he was running for Mayor of Auckland, he had this to say:

They're replacing existing state housing with 8-story slums in the town centre. We've seen this happen overseas – they'll be rubbish-quality... Families need wide spaces to grow up in – they're not going to grow up on the sixth floor of an apartment building.

There is absolutely no reason why – excluding the greed of developers and the ignorance of planners – high-density living should become a "slum" nightmare like an English "estate" or a French "cité". All that is required is people-centred and eco-friendly planning. Attention to green space, sustainable transport links, and integration to the broader culture of the city can prevent affordable housing becoming a shunned slum.

Large apartment buildings can even be more environmentally friendly than a traditional, draughty, uninsulated Kiwi single-dweller property – especially if, as in Chicago and other places, they become self-sufficient in energy by installing solar panels on their roofs. The biggest barrier to children being raised in the Auckland CBD is the lack of schools – which could be fixed by a people-centred education policy.

While John is motivated by concern for the poor, other anti-intensificationists have less savoury motivations. "Big cities" are something, for these people, which happen in other countries. Auckland, to them, is something like a cancer or a parasite on the country, and should never have been allowed to grow to its giant sprawling size (and certainly not with such ethnic diversity!)

Ecosocialism concentrates on quality of life as well as income for working people. "Agglomeration benefits" – the economic, cultural and environmental benefits of concentrating and enhancing the central areas of large cities – are very real. Although some will always prefer a suburban big back-yard lifestyle, the cultural benefits of living in a teeming, vibrant, culturally rich community should be open to all working people of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

*More analysis from Daphne Lawless on urbanist issues can be found in other Fightback articles such as:*

**Auckland's no-choice elections: blue-greens and conservative leftists** <https://fightback.org.nz/2016/10/19/aucklands-no-choice-elections-blue-greens-and-conservative-leftists/>

**Economic apartheid: The ongoing ethnic cleansing of central Auckland:** <https://fightback.org.nz/2017/03/20/economic-apartheid-the-ongoing-ethnic-cleansing-of-central-auckland/>

# Jacinda Ardern's housing policy: Appear to be doing something, but don't scare investors

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By ANI WHITE

In 2017, Jacinda Ardern led the New Zealand Labour Party to a surprise victory, with promises to address the housing crisis as a key plank of the new government's mandate. In its fourth year of government, the party continues in its failure to substantively deliver on its promises: It seems the main aims of the government's housing policy are: appear to be doing something to help renters and first-home buyers, but don't scare capital or investors. However, the goals of helping renters and helping landlords are mutually incompatible. Therefore, Labour has consistently watered down its own proposals.

To set the scene, Aotearoa/New Zealand has a ridiculously inflated housing market, against a backdrop of steep inequality. New Zealand ranks number two in the international house price growth ranks, increasing 22.1% in the year to March 2021, while global house prices rose 7.3%.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, New Zealand wage rates increased 1.6% in the year to March 2021.<sup>2</sup> Rents increased 3% over the year ending April 2021.<sup>3</sup> Stories such as the Upper Hutt pensioner whose rent was increased by \$135 at once, from a starting point of \$410 a week, are rife. The increase, to keep the flat in line with market rates, did not violate recent regulations.<sup>4</sup> In short, house prices and rents continue to surge, while incomes do not keep up. Homelessness is also the highest in the OECD, and 48% of housing applicants are Māori

compared to 16.5% of the general population,<sup>5</sup> on land that was appropriated from Māori by Pākehā (European-descended/non-Māori) capitalists.

The Ardern government's first measure to address the housing crisis was to ban most foreign buyers, who make up only about 3% of homes bought nationwide.<sup>6</sup> This was a symbolic populist measure by a party that had scapegoated foreign buyers during its period in opposition. A content analysis by the author found that Labour Party press releases during their time in opposition never identified groups such as 'investors', 'speculators', or 'bankers' per se as a negative influence, except when negatively coupling these terms with modifiers such as 'foreign' or 'Chinese'.<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> As we argued at the time, this diverts attention from the vast majority of landlords, speculators, and other profiteers who are Pākehā New Zealanders.<sup>9</sup> Banning foreign buyers was also the only flagship housing policy that Labour delivered on. After this symbolic populist gesture, the unwillingness to confront the forces actually driving the housing crisis remained consistent in the ensuing 4 years.

The biggest symbol of the Labour Party's failure to fulfil promises on housing is KiwiBuild. This was a policy to build 100,000 affordable homes in 10 years, a goal the government quickly fell behind on. The inadequacy of KiwiBuild has been attacked from

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1 Miriam Bell, NZ number two in international house price growth ranks, 4 June 2021, Stuff: [tinyurl.com/nz-no2](https://www.stuff.co.nz/economy/property/123456789)

2 Stats NZ, Labour market statistics: March 2021 quarter, 5 May 2021, Stats NZ: [tinyurl.com/statsnz-wages](https://www.stats.govt.nz/indicators/123456789)

3 Stats NZ, Rental price indexes: April 2021, 13 May 2021, Stats NZ: [tinyurl.com/statsnz-rent](https://www.stats.govt.nz/indicators/123456789)

4 Melissa Nightingale, Upper Hutt pensioner 'devastated' at \$135 rent increase, 31 May 2021, NZ Herald: [tinyurl.com/pensioner-rent](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/property/123456789)

5 Emily Dexter, 10 Facts About Homelessness in New Zealand, 21 September 2020, The Borgen Project: [tinyurl.com/borgen-homelessness](https://www.borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-homelessness-in-new-zealand/)

6 Marius Zaharia and Praveen Menon, 'Poor answer': New Zealand ban on foreign buyers starts, 22 October 2018, Sydney Morning Herald: [tinyurl.com/foreign-ban](https://www.smh.com.au/world/123456789)

7 Ian Anderson (AKA Ani White), The housing crisis and the scapegoating of "foreigners", 6 October 2016, Fightback: [tinyurl.com/fb-scapegoat](https://www.fightback.org.nz/123456789)

8 Ian Anderson (AKA Ani White), Who is 'New Zealand'? Publics in Aotearoa/New Zealand General Election Discourse, thesis published 2016, Victoria University of Wellington: [tinyurl.com/ani-thesis](https://www.vuw.ac.nz/123456789)

9 Ibid.



the right, particularly by the opposition National Party.<sup>10</sup> The hypocrisy here is breath-taking, after National spent its last two terms in office selling off public housing<sup>11</sup> and doing nothing substantive to address supply issues. Yet the fact that Ardern's government is attacked from the right should not stop us criticising them from the left. Although this big infrastructure project was portrayed by both supporters and critics as a return to social democratic public housing policy, Joel Cosgrove argued in *Fightback* at the time of the KiwiBuild policy's launch that it sought to address the supply problem in a fashion compatible with continuing financialisation of housing assets.<sup>12</sup> Instead of expanding public housing, the policy aimed to expand 'affordable' private housing in collaboration with the private sector, by a given value of 'affordable.' *Fightback* quoted prominent left-wing commentator John Minto highlighting the problems with this definition of 'affordable':

No low-income family will be able to afford \$300,000. These families struggle from week to week and will never be able to save a deposit or meet the mortgage repayments required for home ownership. They are caught in the vicious squeeze between high private rental costs and the government's impossible criteria for eligibility for a state house.<sup>13</sup>

This affordability problem has since been highlighted by Salvation Army head Campbell Roberts, who apparently was involved with a discussion the Labour Party based its policy on, but who considered the numbers the Labour Party generated unrealistic:

Those numbers were just not sustainable. There [weren't] 100,000 people needing housing if you didn't do anything about making them affordable.<sup>14</sup>

As of February 2020, there were \$26 million of unsold KiwiBuild houses on the government's books.<sup>15</sup> This would not be an issue if the investment was in public housing for those in need, rather than attempting to reconcile supply and demand on the terms of a warped market.

Another, far more modest yet no less controversial, policy the government has failed to deliver is the Capital Gains Tax. This tax on capital gains acquired through selling assets, such as housing, is not particularly radical (Australia and the USA both have CGTs). Yet given the aggressive entitlement of New Zealand's property-owning class, and their unwillingness to accept even the smallest incursion on their profit margins, opponents of the policy launched a scaremongering campaign. Then-opposition leader Simon Bridges called it an "assault on the Kiwi way of life".<sup>16</sup> Ardern's government dropped the policy in early 2019, ignoring the recommendation of the Tax Working Group the government had formed, citing lack of public mandate.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, public opinion was divided – although a Horizon Poll found 44% for capital gains tax and 35% against,<sup>18</sup> a Reid-Research poll found 39.1% for and 49.8% against (a number that was exaggerated by reporters focusing on answers to questions like whether superannuation should be taxed, or whether the policy should be a priority for the government, rather than simply whether people supported a CGT in general).<sup>19</sup> Yet this was not a clear consensus *against* the policy as it was portrayed by the right, so much as a divided electorate, with polls turning up shifting results at the margins of that division. Moreover, public opinion shouldn't be viewed outside the context of the sustained scaremongering campaign from the right, without a sustained pushback from supporters of the policy. Ardern's unwillingness to take clear positions on contentious issues – as also illustrated by her refusal to disclose her vote in the cannabis referendum until both the referendum, and the election, had wrapped up – takes the conservatism of 'the public' for granted, and uses that perceived conservatism as an excuse. Yet public opinion does not form in a vacuum, it is formed through a process of contestation and coalition-forming. Every progressive win, however small, must be fought for. Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party is not a fighting party, even when it comes to a tax measure that already exists in many neoliberal policies.

Many have praised the Ardern government's response to COVID. Indeed, the government has shown competence in a crisis, taking decisive action based on expert advice, and communicating its decisions clearly (a key reason for the success

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10 Kelly Gregor, National criticises the progress of Kiwibuild, 21 March 2018, NZ Adviser: [tinyurl.com/nats-kiwibuild](https://tinyurl.com/nats-kiwibuild)

11 Thomas Coughlan, National Party admits it sold too many state houses, 7 July 2020, Stuff: [tinyurl.com/nats-sell](https://tinyurl.com/nats-sell)

12 Joel Cosgrove, Kiwibuild and housing in the modern capitalist economy, 1 February 2013, *Fightback*: [tinyurl.com/kiwibuild-neolib](https://tinyurl.com/kiwibuild-neolib)

13 Ibid.

14 Henry Cooke, How KiwiBuild fell down, and whether anything can be saved from the wreckage, 21 June 2019, Stuff: [tinyurl.com/kiwibuild-stuff](https://tinyurl.com/kiwibuild-stuff)

15 Jenee Tibshraeny, KiwiBuild stock take..., 7 February 2020, interest.co.nz: [Tinyurl.com/kiwibuild-unsold](https://tinyurl.com/kiwibuild-unsold)

16 Henry Cooke, Capital gains tax an 'assault on the Kiwi way of life', says Simon Bridges, 21 February 2019, Stuff: [tinyurl.com/bridges-lol](https://tinyurl.com/bridges-lol)

17 Jason Walls, Government kills off capital gains tax, won't happen on Jacinda Ardern's watch, 17 April 2019, NZ Herald: [tinyurl.com/cgt-dropped](https://tinyurl.com/cgt-dropped)

18 Horizon Poll, 44% for capital gains tax, 35% against overall, 28 March 2019, Horizon Poll: [tinyurl.com/cgt-pospoll](https://tinyurl.com/cgt-pospoll)

19 Tova O'Brien, Large majority of New Zealanders don't want capital gains tax – poll, 8th April 2019, Newshub: [tinyurl.com/cgt-negpoll](https://tinyurl.com/cgt-negpoll)

of lockdown measures is that they were widely understood and supported). Yet as Bronwen Beechey highlighted in a *Fightback* article at the time:

Although a reasonable effort was made to house rough sleepers in motels, many families spent the lockdown in overcrowded, cold, damp homes. High rents and decades of neglecting or selling off public housing have created a housing crisis. These conditions help coronavirus and other illnesses to spread.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, as *Jacobin*'s Justine Sachs<sup>21</sup> and economist Bernard Hickey<sup>22</sup> highlighted, the government's crisis response of lowering mortgage rates and pumping up asset values bailed out property owners and businesses while leaving renters in the cold.

Many have argued that Labour's 2020 landslide victory gave the party a mandate to take stronger measures (particularly after losing the excuse of having to please conservative coalition partner New Zealand First). However, in a way, this electoral victory gave Ardern's Labour stronger incentives to back away from any confrontation with investors and property owners. Labour was able to win over much of the traditional right's base, for example winning 15 seats previously held by National.<sup>23</sup> This was likely a reward for both the party's competent crisis management, and its lack of radical policy measures on issues like housing and climate change. In her acceptance speech, Ardern underlined her commitment to national unity, to govern for "every New Zealander", and to avoid polarisation:

[T]o those amongst you who may not have supported Labour before - and the results tell me there were a few of you - to you I say thank you. We will not take your support for granted. And I can promise you, we will be a party that governs for every New Zealander. The governing for every New Zealander has never been so important more than it has been now. We are living in an increasingly polarised world, a place where more and more people have lost the ability to see one another's point of view. I hope that

this election, New Zealand has shown that this is not who we are.<sup>24</sup>

These conciliatory words should be taken at face value: this is not a government willing to risk political polarisation, in other words, a deeply centrist government. As in most countries, the traditional right's base is primarily white and wealthy, also one of the likeliest groups to vote. Winning over a swathe of wealthier voters gives the party even greater incentive to not tax wealth, or take any other measures that may alienate Labour's new friends. If Labour took meaningful measures to address the crisis, such as directly taxing wealth or controlling rent, they would risk not only capital flight but voter flight. This is not to say that these policies are unpopular per se, but more specifically that they are unpopular with the prized white and wealthy supporters who Labour has managed to attract.

Labour's March 2021 release of a new housing policy was typically underwhelming. The policy largely consisted of changes to the tax regime, although stopping short of straightforwardly taxing wealth and property, and instead attempting to incentivise behaviour like new builds. In an article for open-access academic website *The Conversation*, Public Finance Professor Norman Gemmell argued that these changes to tax policy were "incoherent", and failed to address the supply problem head on:

If there are better alternatives, they do not lie in even more ad hoc fiddling with a coherent tax regime.

Instead, like the famous real estate mantra of "location, location, location", the mantra for New Zealand housing policy should be "supply, supply, supply"<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, reader responses to a *Guardian* callout for NZ readers' takes on the policy tended to divide into either renters saying this would do nothing to help them, or investors/owners saying it might cut into their margins but was a reasonable compromise.<sup>26</sup> Granted, this is representative of *Guardian* readers, a group predisposed toward leftish-liberalism, yet the class divide between investors accepting the policy and renters questioning its impact illustrates the compromised nature of the policy.

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20 Bronwen Beechey, Being kind? The Ardern government and COVID-19, 8 September 2020, *Fightback*: [tinyurl.com/covid-fightback](https://tinyurl.com/covid-fightback)

21 Justine Sachs, Jacinda Ardern Is Not Your Friend, 12 February 2021, *Jacobin*: [tinyurl.com/jacinda-jacobin](https://tinyurl.com/jacinda-jacobin)

22 Bernard Hickey, NZ's 'K' shaped Covid-19 recovery, 26 August 2020, *Newsroom*: [Tinyurl.com/covid-hickey](https://tinyurl.com/covid-hickey)

23 Leith Huffadine, The red tide: Labour wins 15 seats held by National, 18 October 2020, *RNZ*: [tinyurl.com/blueseats](https://tinyurl.com/blueseats)

24 Anon, New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern Victory Speech Transcript: Wins 2020 New Zealand Election, 17 October 2020, Rev: [tinyurl.com/ardern-transcript](https://tinyurl.com/ardern-transcript)

25 Norman Gemmell, New Zealand's new housing policy is really just a new tax package – and it's a shambles, 12 April 2021, *The Conversation*: [tinyurl.com/labour-fiddling](https://tinyurl.com/labour-fiddling)

26 Helen Livingstone (and *Guardian* readers), New Zealand readers say housing policy shake-up isn't radical enough, 31 March 2021, *The Guardian*: [tinyurl.com/guardian-readers](https://tinyurl.com/guardian-readers)



In contrast, economists from major banks such as ANZ and Westpac warned of the impact on higher rent, showing an uncharacteristic concern for the plight of renters.<sup>27</sup> Rent and property prices are already rising astronomically, so this warning seems both disingenuous and to simply suggest that the status quo will continue. Yet this convoluted tax policy is also a clear consequence of Labour backing away from blunter measures like taxing wealth and property in general.

In summary, New Zealand's Labour government remains constitutionally unwilling to confront the forces driving the housing crisis. Instead, Labour seeks to square the circle of appearing to do something for renters and first-home buyers, but not scaring investors, property owners, and 'middle voters' with measures perceived as radical (such as directly taxing wealth, controlling prices, and substantially investing in public housing). As these imperatives cannot be reconciled, Labour has stepped back from substantive measures in favour of "ad hoc fiddling."<sup>28</sup>

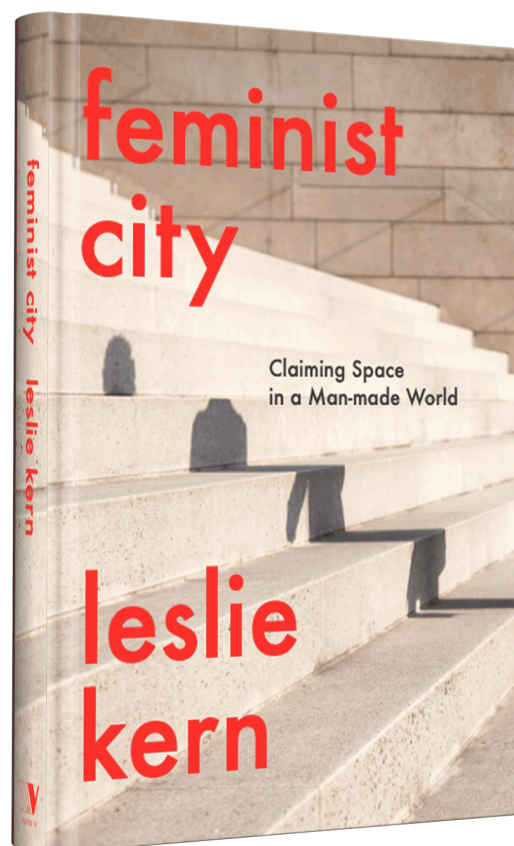
# Urbanism for women: what is, and what could be

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Review of *Feminist City* by Leslie Kern (Verso, 2020) by DAPHNE LAWLESS

I forget the source, but I remember a socialist writer saying something like "*the middle class are the vanguard of living well under capitalism*". Quite often, due to having more education, more disposable income and more leisure time, professionals and the relatively well-off are among the first to experiment with new ways of living – such as minimising the use of animal products, or making carbon-neutral and sustainable choices in housing and transport. Crucially, they also have the time and resources they need to *advocate* effectively for such positive social reforms.

This leads to a paradox whereby these reforms can be stigmatised as "elitist" or "anti-working-class", by those seeking to promote reactionary politics – even if they would benefit working people if they were adopted across society. Thus, in a recent council by-election in working-class Māngere-Ōtāhuhu, a Right-wing candidate was able to describe Māngere's new network of cycle lanes as "elitist and bordering on racism"<sup>29</sup>, echoing a line promoted by Conservative-Left blogger Martyn Bradbury<sup>30</sup>. Attempts to promote alternatives to car dependency, such as the "Safer Streets" trial in Ōnehunga, or the campaign to



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27 Elle Hunt, New Zealand housing crisis: Jacinda Ardern says rent-increase warnings are 'speculative', 29 March 2020, The Guardian: [tinyurl.com/banks-warn](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/29/new-zealand-housing-crisis-jacinda-ardern-rent-increase-warnings-speculative)

28 To quote Public Finance Professor Norman Gemmell again, see Footnote 25: [tinyurl.com/labour-fiddling](https://www.tinyurl.com/labour-fiddling)

29 <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/02-02-2021/meet-the-fascinating-bunch-running-to-represent-a-south-auckland-community/>

30 <https://thedailyblog.co.nz/2021/05/31/middle-class-militant-cyclist-activism-with-a-selection-of-soft-cheeses/>

open up the Auckland Harbour Bridge for cycling, are vulnerable to cynical commentators playing upon the fact that quite often the leading “faces” of such events are white professionals. Working people who don’t have the time or confidence to participate in formal consultations, and who are understandably suspicious that reforms proposed by the already-privileged will inevitably make their lives harder and more expensive, will be vulnerable to such bad-faith messaging.

To be clear, there are already many strong brown and working-class advocates of carbon-neutral and active transport modes.<sup>31</sup> But to give another example, many disabled Aucklanders complain that the new cycle lanes on Karangahape Road have made the street *less* accessible for those with mobility impairments; a problem which could have been avoided if disability advocates had been consulted in design and planning.<sup>32</sup>

All this is a roundabout way of saying that – while we should reject bad faith criticisms from the Right and the Conservative Left – there is a problem of lack of intersectionality in the movement for sustainable urbanism, housing and transport. Solutions such as intensified housing and removing some of the privileges of private automobiles, as long as they are mainly designed and advocated for by the already privileged, will inevitably have “blind spots” and “gaps” which might paradoxically make things *worse* for some of the marginalised and vulnerable, and offer opponents of sustainability an easy line of attack, that will disrupt the broad coalition necessary to make such changes stick.

This is an absolutely huge topic, but Leslie Kern’s *Feminist City* offers a convincing call for a better urbanism along one axis of intersectionality – that is, gender. Kern, an academic geographer working in small-town Canada, is refreshingly upfront with her acknowledgements that this is only one issue, and repeatedly reminds her readers to also listen to Black, indigenous, queer, trans and working-class voices on the issues:

Asking “women’s questions” about the city means asking about so much more than gender. I have to ask how my desire for safety might lead to increased policing of communities of colour. I have to ask how my need for stroller access can work in solidarity with the needs of disabled people and seniors. I have to ask how my desire to “claim” urban space

for women could perpetuate colonial practices and discourses that harm the efforts of Indigenous people to reclaim lands taken and colonized (p. 26)

Kern is conscious that certain urban reforms which make things easier for a certain class of women or a certain class of parents might paradoxically make things worse for others – for example, urban cafés which are comforting and safe “third spaces” for professional women often push out working-class and marginalised groups’ spaces (p. 106). This is an example of ways in which

making cities seem safe for women also tends to make them less safe for other marginalized groups. Efforts to “clean up” downtown areas and “revitalize” residential and retail districts are typically accomplished through a combination of aesthetic measures (beautification projects) and the active removal of groups of people that have been marked as symbols of disorder, danger, crime, or disease... Bodies that do not conform due to age, illness, disability, racialization, class, sexuality, addiction, etc., are marked as “out of place” and targeted for displacement. (pp. 160, 168)

Amid a discussion of the notorious phenomenon of gentrification, she raises the issue of the *gentrification of parenting*:

The norms and cultural signifiers of good parenting have been gentrified as they’re increasingly defined by the particular product brands, styles, and kinds of activities purchased and practiced by middle and upper class urban households. This plays out in the urban environment as middle-class parents demand and draw resources to their neighbourhoods and provide a market for upscale shopping and carefully curated child-centred activities...

As the work of motherhood becomes costlier via the gentrification of parenting, those who can afford privatized services benefit while those who cannot are shoved into neighbourhoods that make their lives even harder... low-income women are forced to find ways to weave care and paid labour together. (pp. 46, 57)

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31 <https://thespinoff.co.nz/auckland/23-11-2016/on-cycle-lanes-ethnicity-and-class-why-nothing-screams-missing-the-point-quite-like-slamming-safer-cycling/>; <https://www.bikeauckland.org.nz/they-call-me-mr-t-bike-champ-teau-aiturau/>

32 See for example Twitter thread beginning at <https://twitter.com/mikeythenurse/status/1399572177221873664>



Key to Kern's argument is the difference between what *is* and what *could be* in urbanism, for women. She understands very clearly that the suburban, car-dependent model of urban life is not only ecologically sustainable, but destructive to community life and individual flourishing, particularly for women:

The suburbs are anything but natural. Suburban development fulfilled very specific social and economic agendas... The suburban lifestyle both assumed and required, in order to function properly, a heterosexual nuclear family with one adult working outside the home and one inside...

the suburbs are not consciously trying to keep women in the kitchen and out of the workplace, but given the assumptions they rest upon, the suburbs will actively (if not agentically) stymie attempts to manage different family shapes and working lives...

The isolation, size of the family home, need for multiple vehicles, and demands of child care can continue to push women either out of the workplace or into lower-paying, part-time jobs that mostly allow them to juggle the responsibilities of suburban life...

For families headed by women, "their very survival," argues Wekerle, is dependent "on a wide network of social services frequently found only in central city areas" (pp. 38–40)

In principle, dense urban living *should* thus offer much more possibilities for not only women, but for other oppressed groups – Kern goes into details on the way that lesbians and other queer people have built their communities on the basis of an urban lifestyle that would have been impossible in any other environment (pp. 80–2).

On the other hand, actually-existing urban life is not much more friendly to women than the suburban wastelands. Kern explains that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women have been considered to simply not belong in the urban environment – "streetwalkers" and "public women" were euphemisms for the despised class of sex workers. (p. 12) Contemporary urban form continues to indicate that women (and parents of small children, in particular) are not welcome:

The city has been set up to support and facilitate the traditional gender roles of men and with men's experiences as the "norm," with little regard for how the city

throws up roadblocks for women and ignores their day-to-day experience of city life....

"Why doesn't my stroller fit on the streetcar [tram]?" "Why do I have to walk an extra half mile home because the shortcut is too dangerous?" "Who will pick up my kid from camp if I get arrested at a G20 protest?" These aren't just personal questions. They start to get to the heart of why and how cities keep women "in their place."

The constant, low-grade threat of violence mixed with daily harassment shapes women's urban lives in countless conscious and unconscious ways... the spectre of urban violence limits women's choices, power, and economic opportunities. Just as industry norms are structured to permit harassment, protect abusers, and punish victims, urban environments are structured to support patriarchal family forms, gender-segregated labour markets, and traditional gender roles. (pp. 15–18)

Kern is dismissive of the nostalgic view of small-town or suburban life "where everyone knows your name", understanding that the autonomy and anonymity of urban living offers space and freedom for women traditionally marginalised communities.

The extent to which violations of women's personal space via touch, words, or other infringements are tolerated and even encouraged in the city is as good a measure as any for me of how far away we actually are from the sociable—and feminist—city of spontaneous encounters... It takes an enormous amount of mental energy to navigate the public and private spaces of the city alone as a woman. (pp. 91, 94).

Kern centres *the right to be left alone* as the basis of urban life. Violence, harassment, and even the sheer unwillingness to allow a woman to enjoy public space without demands for male attention, make urban living unsafe for women, and this is redoubled for pregnant people. Kern describes how her pregnant body became "public property" and an "inconvenience", something that my family is currently experiencing:

Although women often experience comments on our bodies and uninvited physical contact, pregnancy and motherhood elevate these intrusions to a new level. People read my protruding belly as if it said, "rub here please!" I was expected to cheerfully welcome all manner of unsolicited advice ...

[S]trangers' fascination with my body didn't translate into much of an uptick in urban courtesy. In fact, I sensed a constant, low-grade reminder that I was now different, Other, and out of place. (pp. 33–4)

On the other hand, says Kern, "I could function without a car. Compared to the suburbs, this kind of urban density offered a lot more ways to manage parenting, grad school, and domestic responsibilities" (p. 37). She is clear also about the way in which media narratives promote a climate of fear which leads to women self-excluding from urban spaces,

through sensationalized reporting on violent stranger crimes against women and a relative lack of reporting on intimate partner violence... In contrast, domestic violence, sexual assault by acquaintances, incest, child abuse, and other "private," yet much more prevalent, crimes receive far less attention (pp. 144–5).

Making the issues of violence and harassment worse is the prevailing neoliberal logic of *responsibilisation* – the idea that victims of oppression are "responsible" for keeping themselves safe and healthy, rather than a focus on the systems causing oppression. This need to be "responsible" is a constant drain for women, taking a huge toll on their ability to participate: "It's depressing to decline events or leave early because there's no safe and affordable way home. It's psychologically draining to second guess our choices, wondering if we'll be blamed if something bad happens" (p. 149)

Kern weaves her personal narrative together with humility in acknowledging that marginalised people in the city have never been granted "the right to be left alone", as any street-based sex worker, homeless person or person struggling with addiction could tell you (p. 107). She mentions the availability of public toilets as a crucial factor which excludes, not only women, but trans people from urban life – not to mention people of colour who might have the cops called on them for asking to use a business's facilities (pp. 108–11). Once again, we are faced with a gap between what urban life *is*, and what it *could be* – possibilities which don't exist in suburbia.

Also resonant for me was Kern's account of how, growing up in mega-cities such as Toronto and London, public transport gave her and her teenage friends the necessary freedom to explore not only their cities, but their own identities: She makes the excellent point that often-derided urban spaces such as shopping malls and streets are essential places of self-discovery for young people:

Girls must learn to make do with the limited spaces that they're offered. In my suburban adolescence, that space was the mall... Girls paradoxically identify public spaces, such as city streets, as "private," because these spaces allow them anonymity away from the prying gaze of parents, teachers, and other caregivers. The home was strangely more like a public space, since girls didn't feel a sense of privacy or control over their bedrooms and possessions her (pp. 70–5)

The same goes for adult women, of course –Kerr points out that department stores and shopping malls originated as places where women could be out in public without male chaperoning or harassment (pp. 101–3). But her stories from her teenage years strike a chord with me. As a teenager growing up in Wellington, what is now known as the Kāpiti rail line was my lifeline out of the stultifying conformity of the outer suburban fringe into what seemed to be an exciting, colourful and cosmopolitan urban environment. (Of course, it's pretty "cringe" to be comparing Wellington to Toronto or London; imagine if I'd gotten to Melbourne, my head would have probably exploded.)

Nevertheless, public transport (ideally) means *freedom* to younger people and others who don't have access to cars. But again, actually existing transit has exactly the same problem as the actually-existing urban form, that it is specifically not designed for women's actual lives:

Most urban public transportation systems are designed to accommodate the typical rush hour commute of a nine-to-five office worker... However, research shows that women's commutes are often more complex, reflecting the layered and sometimes conflicting duties of paid and unpaid work... Recent research has found that transportation is yet another area where women pay a "pink tax" (paying more for similar services than men). Women are more likely to rely on public transportation than men, although they're more poorly served by it. (pp. 41–2)

Every aspect of public transit reminded me that I wasn't the ideal imagined user. Stairs, revolving doors, turnstiles, no space for strollers, broken elevators and escalators, rude comments, glares: all of these told me that the city wasn't designed with parents and children in mind... I sheepishly realized that until I faced these barriers, I'd rarely considered the experiences of disabled people



or seniors who are even more poorly accommodated (pp. 43–4)

Added to all this, of course, is the possibility of violence and harassment raising its head on public transport as well (p. 151). Unless such problems are dealt with, women are only acting rationally if they think like the classic song by Gary Numan – “*here in my car, I feel safest of all*”. Kern is careful to emphasise that being afraid in an urban environment and in public transit is a *highly rational* response (p. 145), that must be dealt with by material changes, not by “responsibilising” it away

A particularly fascinating chapter of this book for Fightback readers is Kern’s discussion of cities as a place for mass protest. She is refreshingly critical about the sexism, racism, ableism, and transphobia that I witnessed” in protest and labour-movement spaces (p. 127) and the way in which women and parents of small children are excluded in “activist culture”:

I realized this was a choice women throughout history have had to make: be politically active, with all of its risks, or perform your duties as a caregiver in the private, depoliticized space of the home... Not only is this a systemic way that women are excluded from opportunities to have their voices heard by the state, but women’s disproportionate responsibility for child care is typically ignored by protest organizers as well...

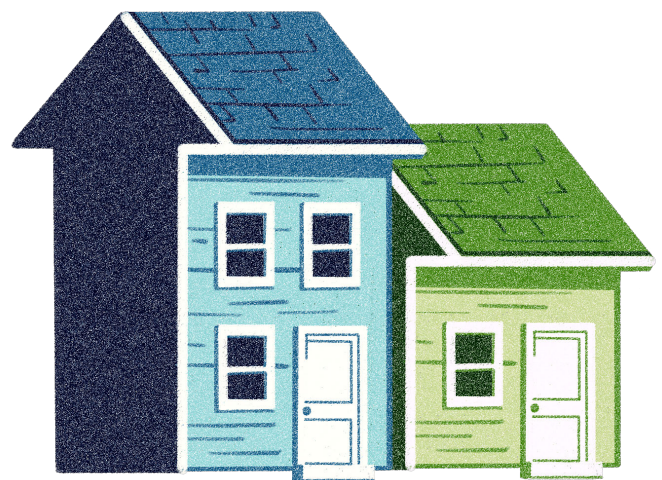
For those who take the activist route, we still have to second guess ourselves both as mothers and as activists—are we appropriately committed to both? Is that even possible? (pp. 131–3)

Kern doesn’t try to offer any firm models for urbanist reform in her book, but returns over and over again to the theme that a sustainable urban future is only possible with the active participation and voices of women and other marginalised urban communities. She sees possibilities for the future not only in the survival strategies of low-income and marginalised groups, but in female friendship networks which she sees as increasingly displacing the nuclear family and heterosexual monogamy as the normative way of living together in the urban future (p. 88). Her statement that “the right to take up space is where the pleasure of being alone meets a wider politics of gender and power” (p. 113) offers a possible rallying call for an intersectional urbanism which includes everyone. And she is also crystal clear that top-down, technocratic

planning won’t solve anything: “no amount of lighting is going abolish the patriarchy” (p. 155):

the faces of urban planning, politics, and architecture have to change. A wider range of lived experience needs to be represented among those who make the decisions that have enormous effects on people’s everyday lives (p. 170)

One caveat for readers in Aotearoa – Kern’s experience of urban form is predominantly that of North America, where working-class people and especially people of colour are concentrated in the inner cities. Contrast that with the urban form as we know it in Aotearoa, where – apart from students and homeless people – the population of the urban cores and inner suburbs are predominantly middle-class beneficiaries of gentrification, while working-class people, tangata whenua and migrant communities are concentrated in outer suburbs at the end of long motorways. It is for this reason that an urbanism which is suited to our local conditions has to start from understanding that *suburban, car-dependent living is all that a generation of the marginalised in this country have known*. A reversion to a densified, transit- and cycling-based sustainable urban model has to include working-class suburban dwellers as protagonists. They can’t just be “shifted around the board” or have their communities unilaterally rearranged by privileged planners, in the same way that their parents or grandparents had to adjust to being “ethnically cleansed” from the centre of our cities during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>33</sup> In short, we need sustainable urbanism from below.



33 See my previous article on this topic: <https://fightback.org.nz/2017/03/20/economic-apartheid-the-ongoing-ethnic-cleansing-of-central-auckland/>

# Through the maze – accessing social housing in Aotearoa New Zealand

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By Bronwen Beechey

*(The author is a social worker working for an NGO in South Auckland).*

As of March 2021, there were 23,688 applicants on the waiting list for social housing in NZ, an increase of 45 per cent from the same time last year.<sup>34</sup> To qualify for social housing, you must be a New Zealand citizen or permanent resident, or recognised as a refugee or protected person by Immigration NZ; and in most cases have income under \$655.41 per week after tax if you are single with no dependents, or \$1008.33 after tax if you have a partner or children. You must also be considered to be in “serious housing need”, a category which is decided by Work and Income, which took over the assessment of social housing eligibility from Housing NZ in 2014.<sup>35</sup> (In 2019, Housing NZ was merged with its development subsidiary HLC and the Kiwibuild Unit from the Ministry of Housing to create Kainga Ora - Homes and Communities).

Behind the statistics, there are thousands of people who are being forced into substandard living conditions and unaffordable rentals due to the interpretation of “serious housing need” by Work and Income. Those who are lucky enough to be considered in serious housing need face months of waiting in emergency accommodation, mostly in motels which are not intended to be long-term living situations.

As a community social worker in South Auckland, a large portion of my work involves helping people through the confusing maze of applying for social housing. The people I work with are Maori, Pasifika or recent migrants. They are either on benefits or low-paying and insecure jobs.

Typically, they have large families which often include parents or other relatives. Many do not speak English as their first language. There are often health issues, intimate partner violence and breakdown of family relationships, and a reluctance to discuss these issues with strangers. When a family or individual contacts our agency, they are often at a crisis point. They may be a woman and her children escaping a violent partner, or a family who have been living in overcrowded accommodation with relatives who have told them to leave. They may also be a young person who has been kicked out by family because of pregnancy, sexuality or resisting strict parenting.

The first step is to ask Work and Income to find emergency accommodation. For families, this is usually fairly straightforward, and they will be placed in a motel, usually on the same day. With single people, Work and Income will generally say that motels are only available for families and that the person should try to find a lodge or boarding house to stay at. This usually results in an argument with Work and Income about why a lodge, as well as being generally substandard accommodation, is not a safe place for a single woman or a transgender teenager to be in. In most cases, Work and Income will then place the person in a motel. However, people without children who approach Work and Income directly for help with accommodation will often be told to find a boarding house or lodge, and given no other options.

Emergency accommodation is booked for seven days. Before the seven days is up, the person or family has to contact Work and Income, then tell them what efforts they have made to find private

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34 MSD Housing Register March 2021. <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/statistics/housing/index.html>

35 MSD, “Who can get public housing” <https://workandincome.govt.nz/housing/find-a-house/who-can-get-public-housing.html>



rental accommodation (even if they have been assessed as eligible for social housing). If the Work and Income case manager is satisfied, the emergency accommodation is extended for another seven days. According to MSD figures, in December 2020, 3,807 households were in emergency accommodation, 1,941 of them including children. A total of 4,031 children were living in motels as of 31 December 2021, with more than 1000 living there for up to one year. From October 2020, people in emergency housing have 25 per cent of their income deducted after the first seven days. This is despite the amount of money paid by MSD to motel owners to provide emergency accommodation - \$1m per day according to recent reports.<sup>36</sup>

People in emergency accommodation are told to look online for properties, regardless of whether they have access to the internet or know how to use it. They are expected to view properties even if the rent is unaffordable. Pressure is often put on people to apply for rental properties that are unaffordable or substandard. A colleague of mine recently assisted a sole parent who had been pressured by Work and Income into taking a rental costing \$700 per week, which was cold, damp and had holes in the walls and other damage.

Once people take a rental, they are taken off the social housing waitlist because they are no longer considered to be in “serious housing need”. One of the families I work with was encouraged by Work and Income to take a private rental property which was not adequately heated, after the landlord promised to install a heat pump. Several months later, the heat pump has still not been installed and the couple’s young child is getting sick and has been hospitalised several times with bronchiolitis. When we tried to get the family back on the social housing waitlist, they were declined because they were in the rental property. A roof over your head is considered sufficient, unless you are about to be evicted or someone is seriously ill.

For those who stay in emergency accommodation, the next step is transitional housing. Transitional housing is run by social housing providers which are contracted to the Ministry of Social Development. There are a number of transitional housing complexes in South Auckland that are purpose-built with a good standard of accommodation of varying sizes, however, some are motels that have been leased or purchased by the housing provider and are not always well-maintained. Transitional housing is provided for 12 weeks and often longer. The provider is meant to provide a “wrap-around” service to help families to either move to social housing or private rentals. The reality is that many providers struggle to provide the

help that is required, due to staffing shortages and the sheer volume of numbers they are working with, who frequently have complex needs.

Another issue with both emergency and transitional housing is the restrictions on visitors. While accommodation providers need to ensure the safety of residents, young people particularly find the restrictions difficult as they want to socialise with friends and family; and the need for Maori and Pacific families to maintain whanau and family connections is also undermined.

Faced with this obstacle course of finding permanent accommodation, many people just give up and remain in substandard conditions, sleeping in garages and living rooms, living in cars or vans, or couch-surfing around friends and relatives.

While the number of homes being built by Kainga Ora has increased under Labour, it is not enough to meet the need. Many of the new builds are medium-to-high-density apartments and townhouses, which are not adequate for larger families. Accessible housing for those with disabilities is even harder to find.

The housing situation in Aotearoa New Zealand is beyond crisis - it is fundamentally broken. It is the result of years of neglect and ideological opposition to public housing, combined with structural racism and neoliberal capitalism. As described elsewhere in this issue by Ani White, the concept of housing as an investment rather than a human right has not been challenged in any real way by Jacinda Arden’s government.

The first Labour government responded to the housing crisis of the 1930s by a massive building effort that also created jobs for those made unemployed by the Depression. There is no reason why, with new technologies available, that many more homes could not be built now, and that these homes would be environmentally sustainable, good quality and provide options for single people, smaller families, larger families and multi-generational households. The only reasons that this is not happening is the reluctance of the Labour government to do anything that might upset the wealthy property developers and slumlords, and the absence of a mass movement that can pressure them to do so. There are a number of reasons why this hasn’t occurred - the disruption caused by Covid19, the overwhelming demands on housing services, and in some cases, reluctance to upset the government that provides funding for organisations providing housing services. Hopefully these barriers to demanding a massive increase in public housing and rent controls on private rentals can be overcome.

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36 Radio New Zealand (9/3/2021) Emergency housing: \$1m-a-day spend a “disgrace” - National <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/438001/emergency-housing-1m-a-day-spend-a-disgrace-national>

# A system that makes housing a commodity can't serve human needs

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An interview with DIANNE ENRIQUEZ by FRAN QUIGLEY, originally published at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/07/housing-evictions-covid-19-crisis-homelessness-organize-policy>

Even before the pandemic, America was in the midst of a massive housing crisis. Now, it's far worse. Our housing agenda has to include investing in public housing, universal rent control, just-cause eviction, and a broad push to decommodify housing.

The devastating economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is now threatening to take away the very roofs over the heads of millions of Americans. More than half of US renter households lost employment income between March 2020 and March of this year, and one in five of those households is behind on their rent, according to the Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies' recent State of the Nation's Housing report. Over four million Americans are telling the US Census Bureau they expect to be evicted or foreclosed upon in the coming months.

This crisis is shining a spotlight on a housing problem that existed long before the pandemic, says Dianne Enriquez of the Center for Popular Democracy (CPD). Even back in 2019, over ten million renters were paying more than half of their income for their housing. That equation put them at imminent risk for eviction or foreclosure, all while the United States gives hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies to corporate landlords.

CPD is a network of over fifty community organizations working in low-income communities across the United States. Almost half of those organizations advocate for improved housing policies, and organize tenants and low-income homeowners. Dianne Enriquez, a longtime organizer of workers in the restaurant and health care industries, oversees CPD's housing campaigns.

**The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) moratorium on evictions is set to expire on July 31, with no extensions expected. What is likely to happen after that?**

The best estimates are that there are around seven million families in the US who are currently at risk of eviction. That risk is very real: even with the moratorium in place, there are a lot of corporate landlords in particular that are filing eviction paperwork already, getting things in motion so when the moratorium is lifted, they can be in line to make evictions happen as quickly as possible. In many places across the country, that federal moratorium is the only protection between renters and corporate landlords. So we are anticipating that millions of families are going to suffer.

**How should governments at the federal, state, and local levels be responding to this?**

The federal government has dedicated a lot of money for rental assistance (a total of \$46 billion to date), which should be able to mitigate some of the crisis. A lot of this federal response, and some local- and state-level renter protections, has been a direct result of the activism on the ground, including by our affiliates.

But what we have been seeing now is that people face a real challenge getting access to that assistance. The big technological divide means a lot of seniors and other folks find the application process difficult, and undocumented families are concerned about all the questions asked in the application process — even though they are eligible — and may struggle with a language barrier. (The US





*Tenants protest eviction notices in Miami, Florida. (Joe Raedle / Getty)*

Treasury Department reported last week that less than 10 percent of the \$25 billion appropriated in December had been distributed by the end of May.)

In Pennsylvania, for example, the state government failed to distribute over \$100 million in CARES Act rental assistance funds designated for housing help, even though tens of thousands of tenants and homeowners needed that money. The unspent money was actually reallocated from these resources and programs to the prison system. Think about that in the context of homelessness being criminalized.

### **What needs to be done to make sure the funds still available get to renters across the country?**

A lot of our affiliates have acted as “navigators,” helping people go through the application process, coaching and training them about what is possible through this rental assistance. The government funds include money for overhead and infrastructure, so we are pushing for states to set up navigator programs to help renters get the assistance they qualify for.

These landlords know that there’s a massive affordable housing crisis right now and they want to maximize rents, so it’s more profitable to put tenants on the streets.

### **What else should state and local governments be doing?**

They should be putting in their own universal eviction moratoriums and mechanisms to forgive rent fully, as California and New York are doing. States need also to deal with landlords that are refusing assistance funds from their tenants because they just want to evict. These landlords know that there’s a massive affordable housing crisis right now and they want to maximize rents, so it’s more profitable to put tenants on the streets. States should not allow landlords to file for evictions if they have refused rental assistance funds from their tenants.

We are on a precipice right now, hanging off the cliff, and part of the reason for that is because there are so few tenant protections. States and local governments should create eviction diversion programs, a right to counsel in eviction proceedings, rent control, and a requirement of good cause for evictions. Those could make a huge impact.

### **Since CPD is a network of state and local affiliates, can you share what some of those affiliates are doing in their communities to push policy reforms there?**

We already had a housing crisis before the pandemic; the pandemic has just exacerbated it. So a lot of our affiliates are pushing for long-term solutions, so that everybody has access to a home where they can thrive in a community that they choose.

For example, our affiliate Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment has won some significant victories in California on rent forgiveness and they are leading a campaign for social housing.



Our affiliate One PA in Philadelphia has a Freedom to Stay campaign for rent control and requiring good cause for eviction. In Las Vegas, our affiliate Make the Road Nevada is organizing to end summary evictions and expand eviction protections.

In New York, Communities for Change, Make the Road New York and Churches United for Fair Housing are organizing to pass universal good cause protections for all tenants. So a number of our affiliates are pushing for permanent tools and protections that have been needed well before the pandemic, because now we are in a moment where people are waking up to a crisis that we've been facing for a long time.

**Center for Popular Democracy and many of your affiliates have called for flat-out forgiveness of rent and mortgage debt. How do you respond to the argument that this demand is not feasible?**

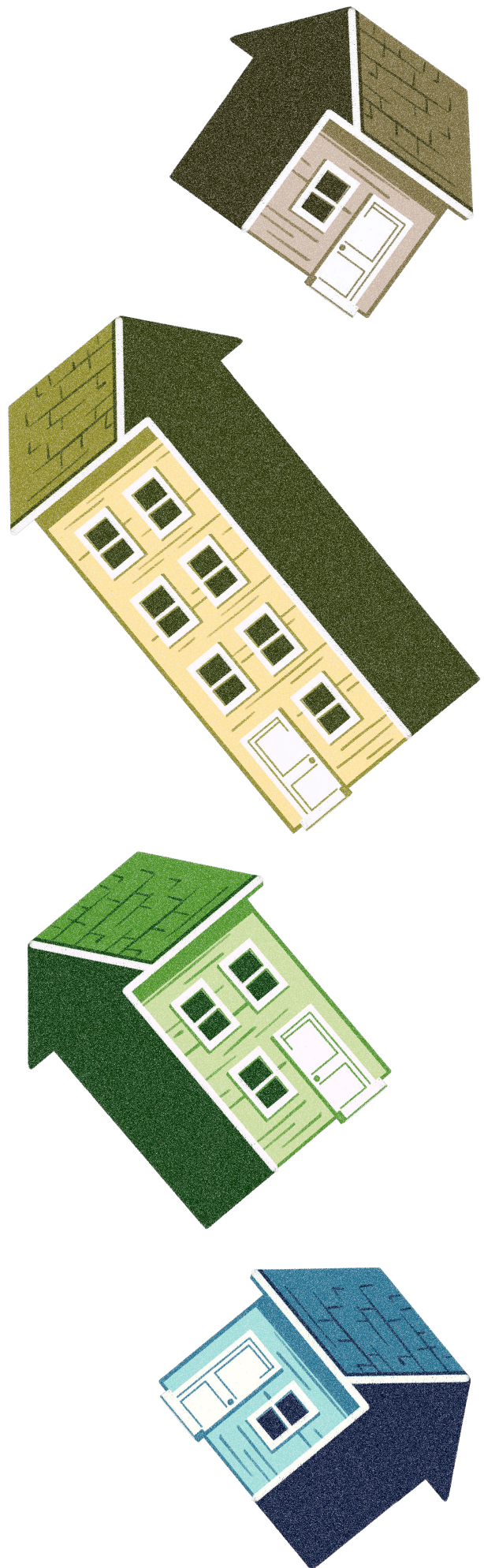
In practice, it is already being done with state-level programs, like in California and New York, and they are using the rental assistance money to do it. The report from our partners at Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE) that outlines how we are spending \$470 billion to bail out and give tax refunds and credits to corporate landlords shows it is clearly possible to forgive rent. We just need to start prioritizing renters the way we have been doing for landlords. If there is a will, there definitely is a way.

**You mention the hundreds of billions of government dollars directed toward landlords. It is also well-documented that the largest federal investment in housing is the mortgage interest deduction and capital gains exemptions that go mostly to the wealthiest. Even federal money designated for low-income housing ends up benefiting corporations via low-income housing tax credits and rent vouchers. What does all that tell you about housing policy in the United States?**

The concept of housing as a mechanism for wealth-building and as a commodity it is fundamentally flawed. When we acknowledge and recognize that housing is as essential as oxygen and water for human beings to thrive, we see how terrifying it is that corporate landlords have been able to use housing to extract so much wealth from poor and middle-class communities.

The government has tilted the playing field to allow a very few people to use a human necessity, housing, to extract as much wealth as possible from the majority of the people in this country.

The simple fact that we don't have any tenant protections in many states is a reflection of just how much unmitigated control the real estate industry and corporate landlords have.



The government has tilted the playing field to allow a very few people to use a human necessity, housing, to extract as much wealth as possible from the majority of the people in this country.

**Is that why CPD and many of your affiliates support social housing, which would ensure that government housing investments do not end up in the hands of for-profit corporations?**

Yes. We have seen clearly in housing programs over the years that we cannot trust in the benevolence of the wealthy to care about anybody else's interests besides their own. So, when we think about how we de-commodify housing and make it accessible, not a wealth-building mechanism for a very few elite, social housing seems to be the best long-term solution. Social housing is something that we've seen work in other countries, and the wealth gap narrows as a result.

Along with social housing, we want to create strong, universal tenant protections, including the ability for tenants to organize and unionize to build power. We want to put vouchers directly in the hands of tenants and their families, so they can manage their own finances. We want to make deep investments in building housing that is accessible to many and can be owned by nonprofit entities or community land trusts or cooperatives. That would prevent Wall Street landlords from gobbling up distressed or vacant properties, which is what we saw happen in the 2008 foreclosure crisis.

**Are there federal-level proposals that would move us along this path?**

Yes, we worked closely with Rep. [Alexandria] Ocasio-Cortez as she wrote the "A Place to Prosper" Act as a part of her "A Just Society" bill package, and also we helped with crafting the Green New Deal for Public Housing. We also worked with several other members of the House, including Rep. Ilhan Omar, Rep. Rashida Tlaib, Rep. Ayanna Pressley, Rep. Jesús "Chuy" García, and Rep. Pramila Jayapal on several progressive housing bills collectively called the People's Housing Platform.

**What impact would these kinds of housing policy changes have on racial equality?**

Housing justice is racial justice. It's not possible to separate the two from each other. When you think about who has been red-lined, when you think about who's been excluded from certain communities, when you think about who's been under-resourced, it is communities of color.

It's the same when you think about who lost the most wealth during the foreclosure crisis, the generational wealth that a home can provide. Who ended up owning those homes? It was a handful of very wealthy corporations that ended up owning homes that used to belong to black families. Now these corporations are turning back around and renting those same homes to black families at astronomical prices.

All that said, though, I don't know a single person in this country, whether they are white or a person of color, that doesn't know someone who's paying too much in rent, who doesn't know someone who is struggling to keep their home or stay in their home. This is a universal issue that we're all dealing with.

We have a huge opportunity to do some significant and substantial course correction in housing, an opportunity that we haven't had since the 1930s.

**This paints a bleak picture. As we confront these long-standing issues and the post-moratorium crisis that will make them even more pronounced, do you see any room for optimism?**

Yes, we have a huge opportunity to do some significant and substantial course correction in housing, an opportunity that we haven't had since the 1930s. Not just CPD but a number of our national partners and our affiliates are trying hard to push this opportunity as far as we can. Now that the country is talking about infrastructure and deep investments in long-term solutions, it's definitely a moment to talk about investing in public housing for retrofits. It is definitely a moment to talk about the job creation that comes with investing in housing and to repeal the Faircloth Amendment that blocks any increase in public housing. And it is definitely the time to institute universal rent control and just cause evictions.



# For an ecosocialist solution to the housing affordability crisis

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By PETER BOYLE. This article originally appeared in *Green Left Weekly*, 15/4/2021

Australia's housing market has gone crazy, again.

"Sydney median auction house price jumps more than \$100,000 in March alone," screamed the headline in the April 7 Domain. "The median price paid for a house going under the hammer in Sydney hit a record high of \$1.755 million in March, new Domain data shows, with bidders pushing prices \$103,000 higher than the previous month's \$1.652 million," reported Kate Burke.

This March madness followed reports of house price rises around the country last year, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. According to figures by CoreLogic, prices rose by 3% nationwide but by more in smaller capital cities and some regional areas. Prices rose by 9.5% in Canberra, 7.5% in Darwin, 6.1% in Hobart, 5.9% in Adelaide, 3.6% in Brisbane and 2.7% in Sydney. Of the capital cities, housing prices only fell in Melbourne (by 1.3%).

Peter Martin, Visiting Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, wrote in the April 13 Conversation that this price surge is not being driven by a shortage of houses or by people seeking to buy homes. Rather, it is the result of a price bubble fuelled by landlords and speculators.

This speculation has been encouraged by pro-landlord laws limiting capital gains tax and encouraging negative gearing — as well as by record low interest rates. This has triggered a boom in landlordism and rising housing prices.

"What appeared to set things off was a decision by Prime Minister John Howard in 1999 to halve the headline rate of capital gains tax," Martin wrote.

Since then, housing costs as a proportion of disposable housing income have more than doubled and home ownership (including people paying off mortgages) rates have declined from 71% to 66%.

Drilling into these figures reveals more. The proportion of households that actually paid off their

mortgage dropped from a high of 42.8% in 1995–96 to just 29.5% in 2017–18. The proportion still paying off a mortgage (and a much bigger one than the previous generation had to pay off) has grown from 28.1% to 36.7% in the same period.

While 68% of people born between 1947–51 owned or were buying their homes by age 30–34, only 50% of those born 1982–86 were buying their own home by the same age because housing has become so unaffordable.

The property-owning class has come out of the pandemic richer and more determined to use their wealth to get even wealthier. Typically, they are demanding measures that will only make housing prices more unaffordable to most.

At the same time, there is a rental crisis: rents have surged in regional areas and more people are forced to live in caravan parks, US-poor-style. Even in Sydney and Melbourne, where average rents have dropped a little since the start of the pandemic, renting remains unaffordable to many working poor and those on pensions or other social security payments.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2018 (well before this latest rental crisis) there were 1 million households in housing stress and in 2019 the national waiting list for public housing was 160,621.

Public housing stock has been steadily reduced — privatised and allowed to run down — turning what is left into housing only for the most desperate. Even then, they have to wait years.

But it wasn't always like this. Between World War II and the 1960s, public housing was built for working class communities. Now it has been so run down and stigmatised that many working people look at it as something to escape from.

The growing housing crisis demands a major rethink on public housing. One of the most rational measures society can take today is to simultaneously



*Public housing protest in Sydney, Australia, January 2021.*

address that crisis while dealing with the urgent challenge of addressing the climate emergency.

Imagine a federal and state government-funded plan to build or acquire and upgrade 200,000 good quality, energy-efficient public housing units a year, while renovating existing housing stock to the same standards. This could begin the process of liberating housing from capitalist greed. It would also make a massive contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions while creating thousands of good jobs.

Beyond Zero Emissions' Million Jobs Plan, launched last June, calculated that governments could build net-zero energy public housing for just \$273,000 per home. These would not only be good for the environment, they would slash household energy bills (unlike the federal government's gas-led recovery plan). For just \$25,000 each, existing homes could be retrofitted to become net zero energy emitters.

A benefit from such a program would be its potential to change public perceptions about public housing. We could have public housing that is far better — and cheaper — than the crappy units and housing that private landlords now rent out for ridiculous prices.

This could go with measures that, once and for all, smash the tax scams that help the landlord class become even richer. End negative gearing, fully tax capital gains for properties other than people's own homes and put stricter conditions on major private housing developments.

Socialist Alliance has demanded for some time that all major private housing developments be forced by law to allocate at least 30% of the development to "affordable housing". But, given the housing crisis, should we go further and call for a proportion of all such projects to actually be public housing, thus boosting the public housing stock?

Currently, many state governments (Coalition and Labor) are privatising publicly-owned land under the slippery rubric of increasing "affordable housing" or "social housing" through public-private partnership with big developers. The end result is invariably the displacement of communities, the destruction of sometimes good and much-loved homes and a further reduction in public housing stock.

The privatisation agenda, disguised and glossed over by "affordable housing" or "social housing" language, urgently needs to be reversed. Developers and landlords stand in the way of making housing the basic right for all — which it deserves to be. It's time to liberate housing from their money-making scams.

[Peter Boyle is a member of the Socialist Alliance National Executive.]





# About Fightback (Aotearoa/Australasia)

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Fightback is a trans-Tasman socialist media project with a magazine, a website, and other platforms. We believe that a structural analysis is vital in the task of winning a world of equality and plenty for all. Capitalism, our current socio-economic system, is not only exploiting people and planet – but is designed to operate this way. Therefore, we advocate a total break with the current system to be replaced by one designed and run collectively based on principles of freedom, mutual aid, and social need.

Fightback is a trans-Tasman organization, operating in Aotearoa and Australia. In the modern era of free movement across the Tasman, 'Australasia' is becoming a reality in a way it has not been since the 19th century. So many New Zealanders (tauwi as well as tangata whenua) now live and work in Australia – and decisions made in one country increasingly impact the other, as the inter-governmental controversy surrounding the Manus Island detention camp shows.

We wish to engage socialists from both sides of the Tasman – in particular, socialists from Aotearoa living and working in Australia – to continue the lines of analysis and directions of organization which we have been pursuing. Beyond the dogmas of 'sect Marxism'; beyond national boundaries; towards a genuinely decolonised, democratic, feminist and queer-friendly anti-capitalism.

We recognise that capitalism was imposed in Aotearoa and Australia through colonisation. While we draw substantially on European whakapapa and intellectual traditions, we seek to break the unity of the European colonial project, in favour of collective self-determination and partnership between tangata whenua and tauwi. We recognise that this must be a learning process.

While we draw inspiration and lessons from history, theoretical agreement on past revolutions is not the basis for our unity. Rather, we unify around a common programme for transformation here and now.



# Fightback's points of unity

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**Economic & Social Justice.** White supremacist, capitalist patriarchy exploits the working majority. We support all movements for redistribution, recognition and representation (as put by socialist feminist Nancy Fraser), from the workplace to the wider community. The average union member in both Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia is a woman, so the struggle for economic democracy must be intersectional: sacrificing no liberation struggle for the sake of another.

**Transnational Solidarity.** Struggles in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia are interconnected with transnational struggles: to give just one example, refugee rights here are connected with the wars that force people to seek asylum. We stand against racist nationalism and imperialism, and for self-determination everywhere. This transnational solidarity crosses all geopolitical 'camps': neither Washington nor Beijing truly supports self-determination.

**Radical Democracy.** Socialism suffocates without democracy, as the catastrophic failures of the 20th century demonstrate. Radical democracy cannot be purely majoritarian (as this may curtail the rights of minorities), and cannot be guaranteed by states: to quote slavery abolitionist Frederick Douglass, power concedes nothing without a demand. Radical democracy is defined by the ongoing fight for self-determination in all sectors of life. We also stand for democracy within the movements, including the need for principled debate.

**Popular Science.** In an era marked by populist fake news from left to right, we seek to 'intellectually vaccinate' the movements against conspiracy theories and pseudo-science. As German socialists Ferdinand Lassalle and Rosa Luxemburg asserted, we must bring workers and science together, rather than locking knowledge away in paywalled journals. Although scientific research doesn't exist outside social context, and isn't the only form of knowledge, it's a necessary check on our assumptions.

**Ecosocialism.** Extractive capital is driving mass extinction. We support investment in sustainable infrastructure: high quality public housing, public transport, and green cities. Landlords, extractive industries, agribusiness and other beneficiaries of the status quo are preventing such sustainable solutions, so power must be taken out of their hands and given to communities.

**Anti-fascism.** Fascism and similar movements claim to be anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist, but instead redirect working people's anger against scapegoat groups or fictitious conspiracies. We fight all tendencies on the Left and Right which scapegoat and demonise the victims of capitalism and imperialism – including anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, transphobia, and the smearing of people fighting oppression as "terrorists". Only solidarity of all oppressed and exploited communities can solve the social problems we face.

**Constitutional Transformation.** Capitalism was established in Australasia through colonisation, and sovereignty was never ceded. As a tau iwi (non-indigenous) based group in Aotearoa/New Zealand and so-called Australia, we support the fight for indigenous-led constitutional transformation. Although we don't yet know exactly what constitutional transformation will look like, it must involve both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, actively engaged in building institutions based on mutual recognition.

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